**Making Ethical Decisions**

**Objective:** Students will be able to argue whether or not a decision is ethical based on the utilitarian approach and the rights approach to ethics.

**Principles:** There are several approaches to ethics and no one can prove that one approach is better than another. In this exercise we will use two different approaches, the utilitarian approach and the rights approach.

The *utilitarian approach* is based on an attempt to strike a balance between good and harm. When deciding to go to war, a president solemnly addresses the American people and attempts to explain why he thinks the good that will accomplished by victory will be greater than the harm done to those engaged in the war. Those people fighting the war may be faced with the even more immediate concern of deciding when military actions that may result in the death of innocent civilians should be undertaken.

The utilitarian approach deals with consequences of actions. It attempts to increase the good and decrease the harm done.

The *right*s approach assumes that all humans have the rights. The difficulty with this approach is determining what those rights are. Often people argue about ethics and rights because they disagree about what those rights are. For this exercise, we’ll use the ten articles of human rights from the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

Article 1. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article 3. Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 4. No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5. No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 6. Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

Article 7. All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

Article 8. Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

Article 9. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 10. Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

**An ethical question about climate change**

More than 95% of the scientists who study global climate change agree that global warming will result in increased death rate of people, particularly in poor nations. However, heat waves in the developed world, which are predicted to be come more common due to global warming, also lead to higher death rates. For example, over 14,000 people in France died during the August 2003 heat wave. As citizens of the country with the highest carbon emission per person in the world, are we ethically obligated to substantially decrease the U.S. carbon emissions even though it will mean a lower standard of living in the U.S.?

**An ethical question about vaccination**

I do not want my baby vaccinated for XXX disease because I have read that it can result in certain learning disabilities. My doctor told me that the Center for Disease control maintains that the risk of contracting XXX is much greater than any risk of problems caused by the vaccination. The doctor said that if lots of people do not get the vaccination, the disease could re-emerge and cause more young children to die. Am I ethically obligated to have my child vaccinated?

***Using the Utilitarian Approach***

Science never deals in absolutes. It is possible that the scientists are wrong about global climate change and it is possible that scientists are wrong about disease XXX. However, in this exercise we will assume that the scientists are probably correct.

Part 1. Complete table 1 by stating consequences (good or harm) of not reducing US carbon emissions and not having a baby vaccinated. You may think of consequences that were not described above.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Not reducing US carbon emissions** | **Not Vaccinating** | **Good or harm** |
| *Increased number of deaths* | *Increased number of deaths* | *harm* |
| *American standard of living remains high* | *My baby doesn’t suffer negative effects of vaccination* | *good* |
| *America may find other ways to deal with global warming* | *Safer vaccinations may be developed* | *good* |

Table 1

Part 2. Complete table 2 by stating consequences laws requiring Americans to reduce carbon emission or to have your baby vaccinated. State one good and one harm for each situation.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Law to reduce carbon emissions** | **Law requiring vaccination** | **Good or harm** |
| *Slow global warming* | *Reduce the spread of disease* | *Good* |
| *Reduce standard of living in the US* | *Harm some babies* | *Harm* |

***Using the Rights Approach***

Part 1. Complete table 3 by stating which rights, if any, would be violated by not reducing US carbon emissions and not having a baby vaccinated.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Not reducing U.S. carbon emissions** | **Not having vaccination** |
| *Right to life* | *Right to life* |
| *act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood* | *act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood* |

Table 3

Part 2. Complete table 4 by stating which rights, if any, would be violated by laws requiring reduction of US carbon emissions and vaccination.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Requiring reduction of U.S. carbon emissions** | **Requiring vaccination** |
| *none* | *none* |
|  |  |

**Reparations for rising sea level.**

Global sea level has risen approximately 20 centimeters (about 8 inches) since the late 1800’s. This small rise has been enough to endanger some Pacific islands. The islanders can deal with the rise on a day-to-day basis but when the 8 inches is added to occasional storm surge, the rise in sea level can be deadly. At the present rate of sea level rise, sea level will be about 10 inches higher in another 100 years.

Within 100 years, people of the Pacific islands will have to either leave their islands or add material to raise the islands. It is not clear where the islanders could relocate. Either choice will be hugely expensive. The islanders argue that the developed world, which is responsible for global warming and the resulting sea level rise should pay the costs they will incur due to rising sea level.

Assuming the islanders are correct that sea level has risen and will continue to rise due to the carbon emissions of the developed world, are you, as a citizen of a developed nation, ethically responsible for some of the costs the islanders will incur? If so, what is the ethical foundation for this responsibility? If not, what is the ethical foundation for you not bearing the responsibility?

*The utilitarian approach does not say anything about respobibilty for past acts. However, the good gained from continuing carbon emisson must we weighed against the harm doe to the islanders. One could argue that the economic might of the devloped nations help fight disease and famine throughout the world and that more than balances the harm done to the isdlanders. For the immediate question of good versus harm the developed nations are responsible on the basis of the utilitarian view of doing more good by helping the isalnders comapred to the damage done to the economic well- being of the developed nations.*

*The islanders’ rights to life and security are threatened by sea level rise and therefore the developed nations have an ethical obligation to reduce this threat.*